



# Co-operative Councils

## Innovation Network

## COMMUNITY

### South Ribble Borough Council

### Community Conversations

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions meant that social interactions were severely limited; and this was reflected in the Council's ability to engage with the community and its' residents. Previous efforts to break down barriers between the Council and the communities it served were strained as a result.

At South Ribble, it was agreed that community engagement needed to be re-ignited, whilst continuing to safeguard the health and safety of both Council staff and residents. As such, it was decided that 'pop up' community engagement events would be created, and 'Community Conversations' was born.

The Community Conversations model was to set up gazebos and sofas in areas of the borough with high footfall, and invite residents to discuss their issues, ideas and thoughts with their local Councillors, and Community Officers from the Council. South Ribble is split into 5 geographical community hubs and 2-3 sites were set up in each hub throughout a couple of weeks in July. Residents are able to engage with the hubs through the localised Facebook pages, but this created a welcoming, relaxed and friendly space where people could stop for a coffee, biscuit and a chat about their local area.

Over the period of 2 weeks, 278 members of the public were engaged. Residents came from a variety of areas, and although some had issues and complaints, many were delighted with the relaxed and open community engagement style, and the ability to have their voices heard directly by their elected Members. The events ensured equal opportunity for everybody, with residents from many different backgrounds attending. Many participants stated that they welcomed the opportunity to speak to Councillors face to face as they do not use the internet, and can struggle with the other methods of communicating with the Council.



Throughout the Pandemic, residents could only contact their local Councillors in either a formal structured setting, or via email or telephone. The option to create an open event within the local communities ensured that residents felt more comfortable and were relaxed enough to voice their opinions on their areas. Residents had the opportunity to sit with staff and Councillors, have a drink and a relaxed discussion. Some were happy, some had complaints, but all were pleased with the opportunity. Many queries and concerns were able to be answered or dealt with immediately, and issues which required work were taken in action plans by the Communities team at the Council- and residents' details were taken to ensure they received a response in a timely manner.

The events also supported the Councils' wider resocialisation agenda. Due to the pandemic and various restrictions, many people have been isolated and alone. Much of the feedback from the Community Conversations, and from work done by the Council to support its vulnerable residents, was that people are feeling isolated and this has impacted on their health and wellbeing. The council has sponsored several new drop-in support cafes across the borough, and the Community Conversations were a great opportunity to share these with residents and gain feedback and additional ideas.

At each event, a variety of literature was distributed; these included leaflets about services, our summer programme newsletter, information about events and Mental Health books. The Mental Health books are part of an ongoing project to destigmatise the concerns around mental health. The books are aimed at adults and are filled with fiction stories that are made to 'make you smile'; these books were extremely well received and many residents took multiple copies to share with friends and family.

Areas with a high footfall were selected to ensure maximum engagement. As this pilot was a success, we are looking forward to running more events in the future and aim to use different locations to ensure that each area gets a fair opportunity for residents to attend. Our landscape varies from rural to suburban within a 10-minute drive and so by creating these events in each area, we created an open opportunity for residents to have a brew and a chat with us no matter the location of residency.

Although Community Conversations were created as a result of the pandemic, the relaxed and casual nature of them has been popular amongst Councillors and residents alike, and many hubs are now considering using a format like this in future instead of the more formalised public meetings of the past. Lessons have been learned from the pandemic, and South Ribble Council is committed to continue to search for more innovative and user-friendly ways of engaging with the residents that it serves.

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